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NEW BIRMINGHAM, TEXAS

DORMAN H. WINFREY

Today two miles southeast of Rusk, Texas, on State Highway 69 there are only a few ghostly reminders of the city of New Birmingham that existed in the late eighties and early nineties. All that remains today are the foundation and basement of the Southern Hotel, the magnolia trees that stood in front of the hotel, and the sycamore trees that mark the location of the New Birmingham Institute. Still standing also is the big dogwood tree that marks the former site of the business district.¹ Within a short distance of these markers can be seen pits where iron ore was excavated some fifty years ago. The only industrial life today is a sawmill that covers the spot once occupied by the Southern Hotel.

In 1891 New Birmingham was a city of four hundred buildings, fifteen brick business blocks, and a population of 1,500. It even had a street car.² The city had an ideal location with numerous hills, valleys, and stately pines. It was said that New Birmingham as a place to live had no superior in Texas.³ It was the high point between Tyler and the Gulf: 590 feet above tidewater with a residence plateau of 160 more elevation. It was often referred to as the "coolest city in the south." This was probably true due to both its proximity to the Gulf and its elevation. Since it was built upon hills, the residents could obtain beautiful views from many points.

The first sign of industry came to New Birmingham as the result of the activities of a sewing machine salesman, Alexander B. Blevins, who entered Cherokee County in the middle of the 1880's. While driving through the rich iron ore districts, Blevins conceived the idea of a great iron-producing city that would rank with Birmingham, Alabama.

Blevins was so fired by his enthusiasm that he got his brother-in-law, W. H. Hammon, a wealthy Calvert, Texas, attorney, to furnish the capital for acquiring thousands of acres of land options. Blevins then went East and enlisted a group of New Yorkers in the project. This resulted in the formation of the Cherokee Land and Iron Company, chartered in March, 1888, with a capital stock of \$1,000,000. The officers of this company were composed entirely of Easterners with H. H. Wilbert of New York, president; Richard L. Coleman of St. Louis, vice-president. There were only two Texans on the first board of directors. They were Captain E. L. Gregg, a Rusk lawyer and head of the Gregg Insurance Agency, and A. B. Blevins, the sewing machine salesman. The new company, first in the region, purchased some twenty thousand acres of selected iron, mineral, and timber land scattered over the country. The company also planned a city, to be called New Birmingham, since it was to become the center of the potential iron industry.

There was no doubt in the minds of the promoters that the venture would be successful. The possibilities of Cherokee iron ore had already been dem-

onstrated by the penitentiary furnace at Rusk. This furnace was built by the State of Texas and was known as the "Old Alcalde." It was put into blast February 27, 1884. For a number of years the furnace, as well as the state-owned cast iron factory, was operated with convict labor in connection with the Rusk penitentiary.⁴ A very important factor was that there was no large city within a five hundred mile radius that could offer competition. Since there could be no interference with its trade, New Birmingham had undisputed possession of the great markets of Texas, Mexico, Mississippi, Arkansas, Kansas, New Mexico, Nebraska, Colorado, together with all the Central and South American countries.

Besides being gifted by Nature with iron ore, New Birmingham also had limestone, building stone which resembled the "Caen" stone of Paris, France; clay, lignite, paints, marl green sands, mineral oil, springs, timbers, cotton, and fruit.⁵ With all these valuable products, especially iron, taken into consideration, together with the natural advantages in its location, there was every reason to believe that New Birmingham would soon have a large population and become one of the strongest and most profitable manufacturing cities of the Southwest.

On October 12, 1888, the first lot was sold.⁶ The New Birmingham Iron and Improvement Company of Texas was established with a paid-up capital of \$3,500,000 and owned nearly 20,000 acres of selected iron, minerals, and timber land lying in and about the city of New Birmingham.

Many sections of the nation have had gold rushes but few have had iron rushes. People moved into New Birmingham overnight by the hundreds. Many of the men and women came from the larger cities of the country: St. Louis, Louisville, Detroit, Montreal, New York, Philadelphia, and Boston being the largest contributors. "Foreigners, cripples, widowers, all came alike. Houses could not be built fast enough to accommodate the multiplying population. People lived in shacks, tents, wagons, and some in mud huts."⁷

In 1889 the New Birmingham Iron and Improvement Company of Texas built the "Tassie Bell" furnace. It was named for Mrs. A. B. Blevins, the wife of the sewing machine salesman, and was established at a cost of \$150,000. The launching of the "Tassie Bell" furnace was one of the most colorful events that had taken place in East Texas. Thousands of people made a trip to New Birmingham just to witness the event. The climax came when Mrs. Blevins stepped into the furnace with a large pair of shears and cut the rope that encircled the power engines, thus beginning the iron industry. The "Tassie Bell" had a capacity of fifty tons per day. A half mile from the furnace the iron ore was dug with pitchforks. The cost of producing charcoal iron at the furnace was estimated at the following:

2½ tons of ore, at 55¢ per ton	\$ 1.24
4—6 tons of limestone, at \$2.00 per ton	0.80
110 bushels charcoal, at say 5¢ per bu.	5.50
Labor	1.50
Salaries	0.50

Interest and expenses	0.85
Repairs, etc.	0.50

Total cost of producing pig iron at furnace per ton \$10.89^a

In November, 1891, the "Star and Crescent" furnace went into blast with a daily output of fifty tons of cast iron. It was built by the Cherokee Iron and Manufacturing Company. The cost was estimated at \$175,000 and it employed some three hundred men. At this time the quantity of ore was beyond calculation, but it was certain the supply could furnish fifty furnaces for fifty to one hundred years. There was no problem about getting the finished product delivered to its destination, or getting the raw material into New Birmingham for manufacturing, for the Tyler Southeastern Railroad, a part of the Cotton Belt System, passed through New Birmingham.

New Birmingham had many industries besides the iron ore furnaces. Pipes were manufactured at the New Birmingham Pipe Works which produced twenty-five tons of pipe daily. Up until the time this company was created, all the cast-iron pipe had come from the East for Texas consumption. The J. D. Baker Brick Company had an output of 25,000 bricks per day. New Birmingham even had an ice plant and an electric light plant. The city was referred to as "the only place in Texas where o'possums could eat persimmons by electric lights." Other industries included the New Birmingham Lumber Company, Bottling Works, Carriage Shop, New Birmingham Planing, Sash, and Door Factory, Steam Laundry, Ice and Manufacturing Company, and a bakery. The business section itself had the fifteen brick business blocks mentioned before, which included the post office, telegraph office, banks, clothing stores, hardware stores, churches, and saloons. The bars of the saloons were dented with gold pieces thrown upon them by the woodchoppers and other workers. The payroll for the workers per month was between \$15,000 and \$18,000. The weekly newspaper, the *New Birmingham Times*, had a paid circulation of over 3,000. Its press was steam driven, with a gadget that folded the papers as they came from the press.¹⁰

The New Birmingham Iron and Development Company also erected the Southern Hotel at a cost of more than \$60,000. This hotel was the pride of the South as well as Texas: New Orleans had no superior. It had three floors with ninety-nine rooms, a basement, and balconies on all sides. The inside of the hotel had fine wood finishings, huge fireplaces, and a bar, which visitors said, was as fine as any in New York. For amusement the guests could play poker in the lobby. If they became thirsty they were served mint juleps. The hotel had its own park. Guests from all parts of the world visited the inn. In its first register, beginning March 28, 1889, and closing February 9, 1890, a record is given of guests from twenty-eight states. Among the guests were Grover Cleveland, who had recently retired from the presidency; Jay Gould of railroad fame; and among the many New York financiers was Robert A. Van Wyck, who later became mayor of New York. People came for the thrill as well as for business. Guests from eight states registered in one day. The register also showed the names

of English Lords and noblemen. Many royal dinners and dances were staged in the Southern's beautiful great dining hall whose walls were finished in curly pine. Orchestras were imported for special occasions.

Beautiful drives and parks were found throughout the city. Numerous churches and schools were to be seen. Besides the workers' homes, there were over three hundred residences. When visitors came they were always carried to the traditional grave of La Salle.¹¹

To leave nothing undone, a Scotchman came to New Birmingham and began construction of a street railway that made connections with Rusk. Tracks were laid and a tram car, drawn by mules, made daily runs. Merchandise was hauled as well as passengers, and on one occasion as many as seventy-five hats were sent to the ladies of New Birmingham from Rusk in one day.

Despite the brave front New Birmingham presented to the casual observer, and although working conditions were declared to be the best in Texas, inside the town there were festerings. Visitors from New York declared the slums of New Birmingham were worse than their own notorious cesspools of misery. Epidemics of smallpox and diphtheria in the slums were constantly spreading into the more pretentious districts. Church groups worked continuously trying to better the situation by doing welfare work in these districts. Sewing circles were organized to keep the children supplied with decent clothing.¹²

From 1888 until 1892, New Birmingham was a thriving and growing city. According to the *Texas Almanac* its population grew to 3,500. In 1891, when at its peak of industrial prosperity, the following report was given in regard to the established industries at that time:

New Birmingham Iron and Improvement Company	\$ 3,500,000
Tassie Bell Furnace	150,000
New Birmingham Pipe Works	150,000
Joe D. Baker Brick Company	15,000
New Birmingham Electric Light & Power Company	25,000
New Birmingham Steam Laundry	5,000
Cherokee Manufacturing Company	500,000
Southern Hotel Company	75,000
New Birmingham Ice & Manufacturing Company	25,000
F. W. Bonner & Sons Bank	100,000
New Birmingham Planing, Sash, and Door Factory	25,000
Times Publishing Company	10,000
New Birmingham Building Company	50,000
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Land Companies:	\$ 4,630,000
Copeland Land Company	\$ 50,000
Kansas and Texas Land Company	50,000
Dickinson Land Company	100,000
Number of brick business blocks	15
Number of men employed at the Tassie Bell Furnace and ore beds	271
Amount of wages, etc., paid per month	\$15-\$18,000 ¹³

Later the New Birmingham promoters discovered that the East was opposed to any iron development in the South and West because of interference with markets for its own products. To carry on the project the New York financiers went to London for additional capital. In London, Baring Brothers, one of the most powerful financial and banking companies in the British Empire at that time, became interested in the establishment. One Englishman, representing Baring Brothers, was sent over to investigate the proposition. In England, it was believed that charcoal was essential for the manufacture of good iron. After seeing the inexhaustible supply of the fuel in East Texas forests, this company agreed to make a million dollar investment.

Here a conflict arose. The Texas Legislature had already passed the Alien Land Law.¹⁴ The English financiers were warned by their attorneys that this would keep them from acquiring any interest in land or established industries. The financiers had hoped that some sort of plan might be worked out, and they invited Governor Hogg and his officials to meet with them and work out plans at a banquet, given on July 16, 1891, at the Southern Hotel. Hogg was a native of Rusk and celebrations were held throughout the day with bands from all East Texas present for the event.¹⁵ The banquet that night was a great event and an old copy of the menu reveals that the guests were served a six-course dinner. Speeches were made in regard to the New Birmingham of the past, the present, and of the future. However, the purpose of the meeting failed. Governor Hogg and the Englishmen could not work out a plan whereby their investments would not violate the Alien Land Law. There can be little doubt that this was the first body blow dealt to New Birmingham.

Another explanation of New Birmingham's decline is an interesting one. Although from the beginning New Birmingham was a wide open boom town, there was only one killing during the entire life of the city. Yet this killing, say many of the oldtimers, is what brought about New Birmingham's destruction.¹⁶ The story is told that a young man and his wife from Tennessee came to live in New Birmingham and occupied a suite in the Southern Hotel. At the hotel also a Confederate general, William H. Hammon, and his wife, occupied a suite. The General was the Calvert attorney who furnished the capital for acquiring the early land options. Before the new arrivals had been in New Birmingham long, the General's red-headed wife became jealous of the young lady and "did not approve of the manner in which she conducted herself." The General and his wife soon got some gossip started. The father-in-law from Tennessee came to visit the newlyweds and became aroused at the rumors that were spreading. He rebuked his son-in-law and told him that had he been the man he first judged him, he would have killed the General for the lies he had been spreading. The young man, without a second thought, got his gun and started a search for the General. The General had just returned from a train trip and was coming into town when the young Tennessean spied him. The young man stood on one street corner and the General another. The young man fired his pistol twice and killed the General instantly.¹⁷ Mayor Joe D. Baker came to the scene and arrested the young man. (He was later taken to the state penitentiary at Rusk where

he was imprisoned for two years and then freed.) Mrs. Hammon tried in vain to have the townsmen lynch him. When all her efforts failed, she went into a fit of rage.

*"She cursed the place that failed to lynch man who slew husband,
and curse came true."*

Houston Press, June 20, '34

With red hair streaming down her back, she ran down the streets and asked that God destroy the town. She called it a "mushroom city" without a foundation and she asked that no stick or stone of the entire city be left standing and that New Birmingham be abandoned to the pines which years before had been cut to make room for the town.¹⁸ Her curse was prophetic. In 1893 the sale of lots began to show a significant decline. The general financial panic of 1893¹⁹ resulted in the canceling of payments upon many lots. The price of pig iron dropped sharply and it was impossible to produce it at a profit. Following this the "Tassie Bell" furnace was blown in and the charcoal beds and power plant were destroyed by fire. This marked the end of the Iron Queen of the Southwest. "New Birmingham was dead."²⁰ People moved away by the hundreds overnight. Homes and business firms alike fell into decay. Little by little the buildings began vanishing. It all happened in such a brief time that it was often said that "New Birmingham died a-borning."²¹ Before the beginning of 1900 there was nothing left of the Iron Queen except the New Birmingham Academy and the Southern Hotel. The hotel assumed a haunted appearance with shattered window panes and weeds and trees growing around it. On March 31, 1926, the hotel burned.²² In 1932, when the State of Texas began construction of a new highway, Highway 40, the last brick structure in New Birmingham, a part of the academy, was leveled with the earth. Today New Birmingham is numbered among the "ghost towns" of Texas.²³

During World War II several efforts were made to revive the iron industry in the vicinity of New Birmingham. One small blast furnace was built, but as an iron industry there was no comparison with what took place in the 1890's.

NOTES

¹This dogwood tree is said to be the largest in the world. It is seven feet in circumference and has a spread of forty-five feet. *Dallas Morning News*, April 5, 1951.

²The 1941-42 edition of the *Texas Almanac*, p. 81, states that New Birmingham had an electric street railway. Old residents say this is false; that the street car was drawn by two mules on tracks. An old photograph in the possession of W. H. Wallace, Rusk resident, proves their contention true.

³*New Birmingham as it is*, pamphlet dated October, 1891, p. 5. Published by Rand McNally & Company, Chicago, Illinois.

⁴*Texas Almanac* for 1941-42, p. 235-36.

⁵*New Birmingham*, 7.

⁹Roach, Hattie Joplin, *A History of Cherokee County*, 81.

¹⁰Daddy Ward, Henderson, Texas, resident, who lived in New Birmingham, served as town constable, and was a laborer on the "Tassie Bell." Interview, May 17, 1942.

¹¹*New Birmingham*, 14.

¹²Mrs. J. E. Watkins, interview, January 18, 1942.

¹³*Houston Chronicle*, December 23, 1941.

¹⁴In her book, *A History of Cherokee County*, Mrs. V. R. Roach on p. 2 states that "according to the notes of his historian, Henri Joutel, and of Father Anastacio Douay, the ambush shot which killed the valiant Frenchman on March 19, 1687, may have been fired on Cherokee County soil. If so, the place was on Bowles Creek between the present towns of Alto and Mound Prairie."

¹⁵Mrs. J. P. McClarty, interview, March 6, 1942.

¹⁶*New Birmingham*, 15.

¹⁷Passed in April, 1891, the Alien Land Law forbade aliens from holding lands in Texas. Governor James S. Hogg in 1892 called an extra session of the 22nd Legislature to consider among other things the changing of this law. It was so altered, that as it stands today, no alien shall acquire title to or own any land in Texas with the exception that it was not applicable to persons owning land at the time of its passage.

¹⁸Mr. D. R. Harris, interview, February 27, 1942.

¹⁹*Houston Press*, June 20, 1934.

²⁰Clipping in Miss Jessie Boone's files on New Birmingham:

"Fifty Years Ago Today—It Happened . . ."

From Tuesday's July 15, 1890 issue of the *Dallas News*.

"Gen. William H. Hammon, lawyer and Greenback candidate for Governor in 1880, was shot and killed in the course of a dispute at New Birmingham, near Rusk."

²¹*Houston Press*, June 20, 1934.

²²For an excellent account of the panic of 1893 see pages 209 and 210 in *Dictionary of American History*, IV (1940).

²³*Jacksonville Banner*, July 2, 1893. In ordinary times the destruction of the "Tassie Bell" furnace would not have been a serious blow and loss to the owners, but with the panic of 1893, and the fact that money was scarce, the company's capital supply seems to have failed at its source. James B. Posey, "A History of Cherokee County," M.A. thesis, University of Texas, 1928, p. 99.

²⁴James B. Posey in his *History of Cherokee County* gives the following reasons for the decline of New Birmingham: "Inadequate financing before undertaking so great development, failure to secure as much money from

the sale of town lots as was expected, failure of local people to invest in the enterprise, and the panicky times that prevented further financing in the North and abroad were the things that caused the failure of New Birmingham." p. 101.

²²Reverend R. G. Behrman, interview, February 8, 1942.

²³*Texas Almanac* for 1949-50, p. 286.